

## 2 CORINTHIANS 2:12 - 3:6

*Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2021*

*Smith*

### MINISTERS OF A NEW COVENANT

**12 Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, 13 I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.**

**14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? 17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.**

**1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? 2 You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. 3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.**

**4 Such confidence we have through Christ before God. 5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

There are times when one thing in the day or in life or family or ministry rises up to the surface and everything else needs to be set aside, put to the back burner for a while. It's that moment when you're chopping vegetables or slicing fruit and you realize, "I forgot to put the meat in the oven." Or last month when I realized I had to renew my driver's license, which has to get done before your birthday, and it was the day before my birthday.

Or let's put this in a bigger picture: In ancient times, two governments or two ranchers who shared a property line might find that their people on the border kept getting into fights about a water hole or a well or a really good grazing area, it was time to set other things aside and go down there and make an agreement: I'll let you have this well if you agree to help me out when the enemies ride down from north every spring. This kind of an agreement was called a **covenant**. Usually this was made between two landowners or two kings. They would write out their agreement and sign it, and they would perform a ceremony: they would cut an animal carcass in half and lay out the pieces with a little path between, and walk the path together. This was to say, "May what happened to this animal happen to me if I break my side of the agreement." Sometimes a king had to set aside everything when the time came to make a covenant, because it could mean life or death to his people. He had to seize that moment.

Well, Paul had a moment like that during his travels and missionary work. It wasn't a covenant, but there was ***an opportunity for saving souls***, countless souls—not the souls of a village, or a city, or a nation, but a whole continent.

Paul's first two mission trips had lasted about three years each, and during the second trip Paul found an opportunity for gospel ministry in ***northwestern Asia Minor*** or Turkey. Now at this time the gospel had gone from Israel into Asia to the north and east, to Africa to the south, and into Asia Minor to the west. But being on the west coast, Paul saw an opportunity to send the gospel even further out into the world. He sent his co-worker Titus down into Greece, ***to Corinth***, to preach the gospel there.

When Titus was late in coming back, Paul stopped his work in Troas (you can think of it as the ancient city of Troy in northwestern Turkey). He set all that on the **back burner** and went over to Greece himself to find Titus, because his work in Corinth was **an important step** in getting the gospel to the rest of the world.

Let me quickly give you an **easy outline** of this book of the Bible, the easiest to remember of all 6 books. 2 Corinthians is this: Part 1, the past, Part 2, the present, and Part 3, the future. And if you know that the middle, Part 2, is chapters 8 and 9, then you know the whole book. We're still in Part 1, the past, in our text, and Paul is explaining why he changed his plans recently. So he is using this older change of plans—all this happened six years ago as he is writing 2 Corinthians—to show that ***sometimes we have to change our plans*** because big things come up. A covenant needs to get made between kings, or the cook needs to get the roast in the oven. Or your very first emissary to all of Europe goes missing.

After beginning this explanation (he breaks off and won't get back to his point until chapter 7) he bursts into a joyful expression of the faith of his readers. **“Thanks be to God!” he writes, “who always leads us in Triumphal Procession!”** This was a victory parade given to a general. There may have been incense burning, and there may have been flowers if they were in season. The smell of those things was victory for the winning side. For the side who lost, some of whom got brought along on the parade, those smells meant death at the end of the parade.

In Paul's illustration, you and I and the Corinthians are **the smell of the incense** and the flowers: we are the evidence of the victory, because we have faith in Christ. To the devil and to the enemies of the Gospel, we are the stink of their failure, a reminder that at the end of the line comes judgment, punishment, and everlasting destruction, agony, and torture in hell.

Now here Paul starts to talk about the being a Christian minister. Who is up to such a task? For one thing, there are frauds around. Paul calls them **“peddlers,”** crooked salesmen trying to make a fast buck off shoddy merchandise when something similar and trustworthy is being sold up the street. Those peddlers don't know the difference between Law and Gospel, and when they talk about Jesus, it's only Jesus as a good example, what would Jesus do? And Jesus as the frowning, scowling judge: Jesus will be angry if you do that. The Gospel-peddlers even had fake letters of introduction. “Look! James the Apostle of Christ signed this note, introducing me to you, just last week!” But James had been murdered by the Jews years before.

Paul asks: Do I need a letter of introduction anymore? Isn't my preaching and teaching my letter? **Aren't you**, the Church of Jesus Christ, **my letter**? This is what the Gospel truly does, it changes hearts. It leads people to faith in Christ. This is the New Covenant.

But this New Covenant **isn't a covenant**. It's one-sided. It's God's word and promise to his people. This is why we usually translate the word "covenant" here with a different word, a word of one-sided promise. The Gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim isn't an agreement. And since there's no such thing as a one-sided covenant (just like there's no such thing as a one-sided house, or a one-sided car, or a one-sided cat) we don't call it a covenant. It's **the New Testament**.

You see, the old agreement or covenant between God and man, the Law of Moses, can't be kept by man. That's why Paul says "**the letter kills**." The correct understanding and interpretation of the Law brings only judgment, guilt, and death. This would be good news to the devil and to the unbelieving world. This is why the devil conjures up peddlers who try to sell people a cheap gospel based on man's own good works. He wants us to buy into a Jesus who didn't quite pay for our sins.

But God the Father and God the Son have sent the Third Person of the Trinity to work true faith in our hearts through the Glorious Gospel, the message of the New Testament, the message of forgiveness through Jesus that brings life.

Do you see that the devil would also like the Christian Church to think that we should talk about the Holy Spirit all the time? He would rock back on his heels and laugh and laugh if everything we said was **Holy Spirit this, and Holy Spirit that**. Oh, we worship the Holy Spirit as true God, the one who sanctifies us and who points to Christ. But shouldn't we listen to the Holy Spirit instead of just stare at him? Did you ever watch a whole movie with the sound turned off? Doesn't the message matter? Don't the word count for anything? To hear the sound of God's voice, to listen to what he's actually saying to us, we need to keep the sound turned up on Jesus. It's in Jesus that we have forgiveness, healing, and life.

The law convicts us, shows us our sins. The gospel lifts up the convicted, and shows us our Savior. That's how they work together; how God's message explains, heals, and lifts us up.

You are **the aroma of victory** that God loves, like newly picked flowers on his table. God holds you out, his bouquet of righteous, resurrection roses, and he holds them out to the devil and to the world and says, "See? See here! This is my work through Jesus my Son. This is the success of the cross. This is what the Old Covenant foreshadowed, what it pointed ahead to. This is the New Testament, the victory of Jesus." You and I are the petals of the roses of God's victory parade. God wants the world to know about us, and through us, to know **the victory of Jesus**. **Amen**.